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ABSTRACT

Through the analysis of qualitative data from journals, interviews, class reflection, and classroom dialogue, two language arts methods instructors traced the effects of their college methods courses on student teachers and first year teachers. They investigated the students' willingness to use strategies they had tried and seen demonstrated in their college methods courses, which strategies they tried and why, and what course learnings were "washed out" by classroom experience. Starting with a sample of students in their junior year (N=72), the instructors gathered and analyzed data through the constant comparative method. The themes which emerged were: the buoying effect of learning teams (in the methods courses) on students' willingness to try and use strategies, categories of cooperating teachers' responses to student teachers with strong holistic belief systems, and categories of student teacher attitudes in regard to their own developing role as school teachers. (Author/IAH)

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TRACING THE EFFECTS OF REFLECTIVE CLASSROOM PRACTICE

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ERIC Abstract

Through the analysis of qualitative data from journals, interviews, class reflection and classroom dialogue, two language arts methods instructors traced the effects of our college methods courses on student teachers and first year teachers. They investigated the students' willingness to use the strategies they had tried and seen demonstrated in their college methods courses, which strategies they tried and why, and what course learnings were "washed out" (Zeichner,and Tabachnick,1981) by classroom experience. Starting with a sample of students in their junior year (N=72), they gathered and analyzed data through the constant comparative method (Glaser and Straus, 1975). The themes which emerged were: the buoying effect of learning teams (in the methods courses) on students willingness to try and use strategies, categories of cooperating teachers' responses to student teachers with strong holisitic belief systems, and categories of student teacher attitudes in regard to their own developing role as school teachers.

Recent studies by Zeichner and Tabachnick (1981), Goodman (1986), and others have suggested that the effects of university methods courses are "washed out" by actual school experience, whether that school experience is student teaching or actual first year teaching as a professional. While there is obviously some amount of knowledge from the teacher education program that remains with the beginning teacher, many of those teachers do not see much relationship between what they later perceive as idealistic or ivory tower college instruction in methods and the "real world" of teaching.

Out interest, as instructors in reading, language arts and social studies methods, has been to trace the effects of our college methods courses as our students enter student teaching and in some cases their first year of teaching. First, we wanted to see which strategies and curriculum structures of those they saw demonstrated and of those which they themselves tried in our classes would they then attempt in their student teaching experience and in their first year of teaching.

Secondly, we wanted to see what factors affected their willingness and ability to attempt those strategies in student teaching and their first year of teaching. Third, we wanted to see if, indeed, their methods

courses were "washed out" by the pressures and other factors related to first year teaching.

Our interest in pursuing the effects of our own teaching was precipitated by our attempts at more reflective classroom practice--practice which we felt highlighted the students' own learning strategies in the classroom. We felt that if we could demonstrate holistic curriculum development and live our models in our own teaching, then students would value it and develop strong belief systems that were based on sound theory and would withstand challenge in field experience.

Starting with four classes (N=72) of undergraduates in the fall and spring semesters of the 1989-90 school year, we began to document through journals, interviews and reflection papers, students' responses to and learning of holistic teaching methods and curriculum structures in reading, social studies and the language arts. The fall semester students had difficulty with what they perceived as a lack of structure in the methods courses. They were quite unused to making decisions and allowing for open-ended curriculum structures such as the "authoring cycle" (Harste, Short & Burke, 1988). They were very concerned about being learners along with the children in the practicum experience connected with the courses. Many felt that they should have known

exactly what to do before joining the children for the writing and publishing sessions which were a part of the authoring cycle. Though they had all read the text on the authoring cycle and responded to it in their class logs, their concept of teaching and teacher knowledge was that of "expert" who always had all the answers.

We, as the course instructors, attempted to respond to the students' needs for more structure and feedback the next semester. We added a "learning team" component: students in both sections of the class were grouped in teams of four or five for classroom strategies and assignments. It seemed that because of this new grouping of students, there was less negative reaction to open-ended strategies in the spring semester. It appeared that the learning teams provided a "buffer zone" between the demands of decision-making and the students' instructional histories of transmission mode teaching. The learning teams appeared to provide stability for those groups and allowed them to take risks and attempt new strategies because of the support received from their teams.

Data Analysis

Initial data analysis of ten students who had completed student teaching, suggested that 1) students who strongly adopted a "whole language" orientation tended to want to "convert" cooperating teachers to

their way of thinking and to demonstrate strategies to their cooperating teachers and yet were fearful of "turning off the teachers to whole language," 2) those students with whole language orientations on the Theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile (TORP) at the beginning of the methods courses maintained that orientation no matter what the influence of the cooperating teacher in the student teaching period. As we analyzed our data from journals, interviews and reflection papers, a number of salient themes emerged. Using Glaser and Strauss' (1975) constant comparative methods, we utilized data and grouped and regouped according to themes. Students' perceptions of the value of strategies and their comments about course structure and cooperating teacher interactions were organized into the themes which follow. Our interest in students' recognition and reflection of their own learning strategies is highlighted in their reactions to the semester's work as revealed in the data collected. As we had hoped and expected, their views of themselves as teachers were intimately connected to their views of themselves as learners. The following areas became focus units as we analyzed our initial data from the entire sample. The first is "Positive response to students' learning teams." The four major areas below were the most strongly emerging in our data. These salient points came directly from

student talk, reflections and journals.

Positive Response to Students' Learning Teams

1. Knowledge base expansion-synergy of group learning

2. Metacognitive views of the teaching/learning process

3. Confidence and self-esteem

4. Social learning

A part of this study was to interview and observe the cooperating teachers of our students as they entered student teacher. We have come to expect a variety of responses to our students with holistic beliefs about curriculum. The following categories describe cooperating teachers repsonses.

Categories of Cooperating Teacher Responses to Student Teachers with Strong Holistic Belief Systems

1. Resistent to student teacher's suggestions/beliefs

2. Neutral/reserving judgment

3. Receptive but feeling inadequate

4. Interested/active learning from student teacher

5. Holistic curriculum orientation/team teaching situation

We have also begun to categorize our student teachers, as we interview them and observe their successes and difficulties. The following categories reflect our current views of student teachers and their attitude about their daily work as student teachers.

Categories of Student Teachers

1. Pragmatic - do what works, keep everybody happy, "fake it 'til you

make it."

2. Negotiator - not supported by the supervisor but willing to work at negotiating a position in which can develop whole language curriculum in classroom.

3. Zealot - so convinced of theory/out to convert teacher to position of whole language. Qualities of negotiator.

4. Suffering silent - zealot. whole language orientation but without negotiating skills.

Conclusions

We need bridges between belief systems. Currently a strong dichotomy exists between practical theory (as experienced and valued by the new student teachers) and traditional classroom practice (as currently practiced in most classrooms throughout the country. Many classroom teachers believe that whole language theory and practice amounts to the "frills" of the curriculum to be pursued after the "have to's" are done. While most student teachers coming from our methods classes do not feel that whole language philosophy and practice are frills, they currently do not know how to bridge the beliefs systems between themselves and the powerful weight of already established and long accepted practice.

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